The ABCs of Education in 2040

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From the time I was in preschool, I always knew that I wanted to be a teacher. The height of my first foray into “teaching” was in 1981, almost 40 years ago. My two younger brothers often recall how much “fun” it was to play school with me. “Fun for you,” they’d say. “You always got to be the teacher. All we ever did was worksheets, and if we didn’t do exactly what you asked, we’d get our names written on your hand-held chalkboard!” I can’t say they were wrong. When my brothers wouldn’t cooperate (read: refused to comply with my requests), I would recruit (read: incentivize with food) the other neighborhood kids to be my students. In my 10-year-old mind, school was a place for decorum, order, and where rules were strictly enforced. Teachers were the repositories of all knowledge in ways of being and doing. The onus lay squarely on the student to learn and master the material, regardless of how it was taught, or in some cases — how it wasn’t. My memories as a student are mostly defined as being a passive bystander in my own education, holding little to no power to advocate for what I needed to maximize my social, emotional, and academic well-being.

Fast forward almost four decades. As a parent of two high school-aged children, there are obvious and numerous ways in which education has changed since I was a student. And yet, there are obvious and numerous ways in which the education system has failed to responsively adapt to meet the needs of all learners. Schools across our great state have amazing educators who every day go above and beyond to be in service to their students. And yet, in the year 2020, we continue to educate children in an antiquated system that is predicated upon the notion that adults hold all of the power to determine and measure what success and achievement looks like, sounds like, and feels like. As I envision what education could look like in 20 years, I believe we must prioritize and operationalize the following core tenets: Access, Belonging and Courage. It is my humble assertion that if we truly aspire to serve every student with the highest-quality education that each child deserves to prepare them for whatever lies beyond our classrooms, we must dig deep to reflect how we, as a collective, will ensure equitable access of resources to all students, the conditions for each individual to have a sense of belonging, and a culture where it both permissible and expected to us speak and act with the type of courage to transform our system so that each and every child may reach their fullest potential.

Access
After graduating with a degree in education and obtaining my teaching license, I finally got to enter a real classroom as an official teacher. I was immediately struck by how inflexible the system was in my endeavor to meet the needs of all my students. More than anything, I wanted to build authentic and meaningful relationships, and yet with less than an hour for approximately 30 students each period, I found it next to impossible. Despite my best intentions, I know I didn’t forge the quality of connection that every student deserved. The system in which I both learned and taught, and now where my two children are learning, has not evolved. I know I failed many of my students by exacerbating an already existing and pervasive relationship gap that exists in our schools. I know some of my students did not have equitable access to me, their teacher, to nurture and develop a strong social and emotional connection to them which presumably impacted their thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs about my class or school as a whole.
Of course, we know that access to relationships is not the only resource that is inaccessible to many of our students. Access to rigorous coursework, access to high-quality teachers, access to teachers and a robust curriculum which represents and reflects the diversity of the students we serve, access to quality physical resources including buildings and technology that are conducive for learning, and access to an educational system that is free from structural, institutional, and individual racism all remain barriers which will require all of us to overcome for the benefit of our students.

**Belonging**

“True belonging doesn’t require us to change who we are. It requires us to be who we are.” I believe this quote by Dr. Brené Brown encapsulates the very essence of what our schools should be for our students. Do our schools right now offer a space and place for each child to show up as exactly who they are? Unfortunately, we know that too many of our students do not feel safe in our schools, do not feel that their teachers care about them, or are interested in them as a person.


No one argues that learning is paramount, and of course it is critical that our students acquire the knowledge they need to prepare them for wherever their path leads upon graduation. And yet, it is my assertion that we currently operate within a system that subjugates our primal need as human beings for connection, too often in the name of high stakes assessments and predetermined metrics of success. I believe we must be more intentional about creating space where learning can be interdependent and co-created where teachers and students alike can share power and responsibility for the learning that takes place.

We know that students must feel safe in order to learn. We know what happens to the brain when it is flooded with cortisol because of stress and perceived threat. The body seems to process and experience social threat and disconnection in the same way it experiences the threat of physical harm. (Eisenberger N. & Cole S.W. (2012). Social neuroscience and health: neurophysiological mechanisms linking social ties with physical health. I would maintain that academic achievement is inextricably linked with our students’ social and emotional health, and that cultivating a true sense of belonging for each and every student starting in Pre-K, throughout elementary and maintaining it throughout secondary school, is imperative if we want all learners to achieve at their highest level.

**Courage**

It is my hope that we can one day embark upon a national conversation to acknowledge that the foundation upon which our education system was built was never intended to serve all students equally. While education of African Americans was forbidden under slavery, slaves put themselves at great risk, including beatings, amputations, and death, in the pursuit of educating themselves and other enslaved individuals. Advocating for the right for an equal education played a prominent role in the civil rights struggles in the United States and continues still today. Heather Andrea Williams, 2005. Self-Taught: American Education in Slavery and Freedom. Chapel Hill, North Carolina. University of North Carolina Press.

Today, disparities in school discipline, inequities of resources, and the trend of resegregation of public schools has greatly impacted African American students’ educational experiences. Inequities stemming from our nation’s past have been institutionalized in our systems, policies, and practices that perpetuate the gaps in outcomes for many African Americans.

https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crs/publications/human_rights_magazine_home/black-to-the-future/past-is-prologue/
American Indian boarding schools, which existed in Minnesota and throughout the United States, is another dark chapter in our nation’s history. Boarding schools were part of a national policy to push for the erasure of Native language, religion, and culture in order to “Americanize” Indians. Children were forcibly removed and abducted from their homes where they were taught to assimilate to the ways of white people. U.S. Army Officer Richard Henry Pratt founded the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in 1879. Pratt believed in “assimilation through total immersion” and in 1892 said “A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, and only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him and save the man.”


I believe that until there is an honest reckoning of how our nation’s history has shaped and informed our current educational landscape, we will never be able to get to the root cause of why we continue to have such pervasive gaps amongst our students. Our education system is not independent of other systems; healthcare, housing, economic development, transportation, nutrition, and the criminal justice system all have structural and institutional barriers that impact our students and families. Many of these barriers exist because the systems were intentionally designed to privilege some and oppress others. I believe our way forward includes knowing and understanding our past. If we are truly about transforming our educational system to serve all students, then it is incumbent upon us to disrupt and even dismantle the parts of the system that are continuing to perpetuate the inequities.

I also believe we need the courage to continuously ask ourselves “Does every member of our board demonstrate in both word and action the belief that every child can and will learn?” Are there unconscious biases, prejudices, and attitudes toward certain groups of students for whom we hold lower standards, not because we are bad people, but because we have been socially conditioned to hold different expectations for different groups of students? How do we talk about our students who are from culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically different backgrounds than ourselves? Will we as adults have the courage to turn inward to ask ourselves what must be done to challenge the status quo by naming the uncomfortable realities and unequal conditions that result in the inequities in our district? Will those in positions of power and privilege exercise the political will that it will take to work toward eliminating the predictability of success and failure that currently correlates with any social or cultural factor? Simply put, will we as adults be willing to disrupt our own comfort so that we can ensure inclusive and just learning environments for all our students?

I envision an education system where all students have access to the resources they need to develop into the highest expression and best version of themselves. I envision an education system that centers our shared humanity, cultivating a sense of belonging for every person. I envision an education where the individuals who are privileged with the decision-making authority will have the courage to advocate and fight for all students with the same fervor, tenacity, and urgency that they would employ for their own children.
I envision an education system where our students do not solely define their worth or identity by how many AP courses they take, what their ACT score is, or to what college they were admitted, and where student data is used as a vehicle for deeper inquiry to learn more about what we must be done to better support our students and families. I envision an education system that does not operate in isolation; where solutions are rooted in the reality that all societal systems function in an interconnected ecosystem that cannot be separated from one another. I envision an education system that is fully funded so that no child goes without the care and resources they need to flourish and thrive.

Simply put, I envision an education system where each child will be seen and heard for exactly who they are; that they may grow into the people they are meant to become in order to fully contribute to a world in which we all share.